

Chef shortage leaves restaurants scrambling



KATHLEEN PIERCE | BDN
Kyle Kunesh works the line at the Somerset Taphouse. He has been working nonstop since the restaurant opened at Whole Foods Market, where a line cook has been advertised for a month.

‘This is the worst I’ve seen since 1986,’ says one owner

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

In Kittery, in Portland, in Bar Harbor and beyond, the story is the same: Line cooks are wanted but few are stepping up. With Memorial Day weekend fast approaching, kitchen help in Maine is in short supply. Craigslist ads and help-wanted signs dotting the coast underline the urgency. Owners of clam huts on the water and James Beard-winning spots in Maine’s foodiest city alike are straining to find cooks for the summer surge. Michael Landgarten, owner of Robert’s Maine Grill and Bob’s Clam Hut in Kittery, is offering \$1,000 for in-house referrals and has sent an employee overseas to find help. “We used to have stacks of applications,” said Landgarten, who

has been in the restaurant industry for 30 years. “Now seasonal workers want to be outside, cutting lawns, painting houses, doing construction. Not as many want to work in kitchens.” Those who have applied are not skilled enough to handle the fast-paced line cook gig in this full-service, two-story restaurant with a raw bar and deck. “I’d much prefer to hire locals. It would be much easier,” he said. “But it gets harder and harder.” Although he has hired 30 people on work visas from Romania, Serbia, Czech Republic and Jamaica to work in Robert’s kitchen this season, the remaining spots are still unfilled. “This is the worst I’ve seen since 1986. We are not getting any applicants.” The reason is multipronged. An improved economy means more jobs are available, and competition among restaurateurs is

fierce. While there aren’t enough local applicants for kitchen work, cities such as Portland, followed by Bangor, Auburn and Lewiston, continue welcoming new restaurants regularly. On top of that, seasonal operations all along the coast swell with hiring demands this time of year. “Summer dwarfs the winter population. There is a tremendous need for cooks,” Greg Dugal, chief operating officer of the Maine Restaurant Association, said. “The shortage is true and acute. It rears its ugly head periodically,” Dugal said. “In Maine roughly 40 percent of our industry is seasonal kitchens in inns and restaurants. People are less inclined to settle for a seasonal offering when they can get year-round work.” But this year, even established

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Creativity thrives, on stage or in kitchen

If you’d asked me 20 years ago if I’d ever stop performing on stage, I would’ve said of course not. I was one of those kids who spent afternoons at the dance studio and auditioned for every production — musicals, plays, whatever — I could. Although I gave up dance lessons by high school, my theater credits on my college application were long. When asked what I wanted to do in life, I’d say I wanted to be a writer — and an actress. Both creative endeavors, the two professions seemed to go hand in hand. They fit — a two-piece puzzle that came together perfectly in my head. After all, writers write the words actors say, and they critique the work actors perform. Actors bring it all to life. Why couldn’t I do both?



SARAH WALKER CARON
MAINE COURSE

It didn’t matter that I couldn’t sing. As much as I loved musical theater, there are so many wonderful nonmusical productions I could perform in — anything by Shakespeare, perhaps a revival of “Machinal” and definitely “A Streetcar Named Desire.” I held onto my stage dreams through college, taking classes on theater criticism and whatever dramatic literature courses I could fit in. But I stopped auditioning. I left the acting to the serious actors who wanted that more than anything else. In the end, I chose to pursue only writing. My daughter is drawn to the stage, as I once was. She wants to be so many things — an actress, a singer and a teacher, among them. As a mom, I’m letting her take the lead on it all. She can join the chorus, audition for school plays and whatever else her heart desires. And if she truly loves it, I will support her as long as she wants to be there. Meanwhile, I’ll just keep writing. Writing lets me share the stories of people, places and things with the world. It also lets me share the food that nourishes my family — such as these sweet potatoes. Much like the puzzle of careers I dreamed of when I was younger, these are a puzzle of flavors with pieces that fit perfectly together to make a satisfying dish. The tender, sweet mashed flesh of baked sweet potatoes is a good contrast to the salty, crispy pancetta veggie topping. Sweet and salty, creamy and crispy, it’s a yin and yang of flavors and textures. You start by baking the sweet potatoes. Like other potatoes, you prick a few holes in them and then bake them to tender. It takes a little under an hour. Hint: Place a baking sheet on the rack below the potatoes to catch drippings as they bake for easier cleanup. While the sweet potatoes cool, make the topping. First, saute the pancetta to crisp. Then add the veggies and saute until they are

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Customers wait for their food from Pompeii Pizza recently at the Bangor Waterfront.

ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

Keep on trucking

Trio of food trucks is back at Bangor Waterfront, with a mystery fourth on the way

BY SHELBY HARTIN
BDN STAFF

Alex Bounds reaches for a pizza waiting on a baker’s rack to his right as Dawn Carey pieces another pie together, topping it with colorful vegetables. Bounds transfers the creation to an oven where the crust slowly takes on color and the cheese starts to bubble. Scattered around Pompeii Pizza, which has been operating seasonally on the Bangor Waterfront since 2013, customers patiently await their lunch while enjoying the light sum-

mer breeze and warm sun. Travis Carey boxes up a pie, hollers out a name, and another customer leaves with lunch in hand. From October to mid-April, Pompeii Pizza is closed for business, but instead of a locked door on a brick-and-mortar building, the mobile stone-fired business is in storage. With the onset of summer, Pompeii Pizza is back, but it’s not the only food truck to call the Bangor Waterfront home — and due to approval by the city, it can expect more company in the coming months. “The council approved the



Pizzas cook at Pompeii Pizza recently at the Bangor Waterfront.

ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

addition of a fourth spot and we’re still working to add a fifth,” Tracy Willette, Bangor’s director of parks and recreation, said recently. On May 9, the council agreed to allow a fourth food truck on the waterfront, which already was provided for under an ordi-

nance adopted Sept. 13, 2010. At that meeting, the council also referred an ordinance change that would extend the allowed hours and expand the number of food trucks to five. The city’s planning board approved the change last Tuesday, and the

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A trendy roast for whatever roast you have

If you are an online kind of person, with your phone in hand or tablet open nearby; if you check Pinterest daily (or hourly); if you watch “Good Morning America” every day, then this recipe will be — or ought to be — familiar. Mississippi Roast is apparently what they call “trending.” That is, it’s cropping up a whole lot on social media (for the uninitiated, which I suspect includes a fair number of you dear readers, any online sites where people make and send electronic messages, tag favorite things of all sorts, indicate approval by “liking” and forwarding comments from anyone).

Evidently, the recipe has been “pinned” a million times since 2014 on Pinterest. It is as if the recipe were clipped 1 million times from newspapers and magazines, passed from person to person on little scraps of paper, and stuck on some giant, world-sized bulletin board. I saw it in the New York Times, and for some odd reason it caught my attention, possibly because



SANDY OLIVER
TASTE BUDS

anything I can cook slowly on the wood-burning kitchen stove at the same time it keeps my house warm really appeals to me. The original recipe, contributed by Robin Chapman of Ripley, Mississippi, to a community cookbook and subsequently picked up by a blogger, calls for using your slow cooker, so this is a great recipe for cooks who work outside the home but want a hot dinner without a last-minute scramble. The first time I made this recipe, I used beef, and we loved it. Then I tried it with a whole chicken and it was wonderful. Next, I will try this with a piece of veni-

son, and it occurs to me that this combination with a fresh pork shoulder would produce a terrific variation on pulled pork. In fact, this is a kind of pulled beef recipe that can be served on a bun if you want, or a little pile of noodles, or alongside potatoes. The secret ingredient is pepperoncini, found in the pickle aisle of the grocery store. This is about as hot a pepper as I can stand and, without being painful, lends a lovely warmth and zip to the beef. The recipe also called for a couple of packages of premixed stuff including ranch dressing season-

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